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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000468

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: ONE INSIDER'S AKP: MISTAKES, POSSIBILITIES,
LOOKING AHEAD

REF: ISTANBUL 427

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Metin Kulunk, an Istanbul-based Justice and Development Party (AKP) founding member and rival to Mehmet Muezzinoglu for AK Party's Istanbul Chairmanship, met with us May 23 to review his recent trip to the U.S. and share views of the AKP heading into parliamentary elections. He was concerned the party may have missed a leadership opportunity for Turkey, cited former President and Prime Minister Ozal as a role model for governing, said economic growth was Turkey's leading requirement and argued a focus on the west was the right approach for Turkey's foreign policy. End summary.

¶2. (C) Having lost a bid in 2003 for AKP Istanbul party chairman, Metin Kulunk founded a group among like-minded, conservative Istanbul AKP members to sponsor speakers focused on Turkey and its future. This helps Kulunk maintain a profile in the party. The group also affords him opportunities for engagement with ideas beyond the scope of more insular party activists. Though not an English speaker, he indicates a growing interest in understanding and learning from U.S. political and civil society. It was a revelation to him to learn that there are advocacy offices within the USG defending human rights, even against other USG bureaucracies.

LOST CONFIDENCE

¶3. (C) Kulunk described Turkey as being at an historic juncture. His party - he mentioned Parliamentary Speaker Arinc by name - missed (and perhaps mishandled) the opportunity to elect a president. AKP was trying for another turn but much more effort and time were needed, he felt, to win this prize a second time around. Recalling the debacle of 1961 when sitting PM Menderes was hung and President Bayar jailed, Kulunk said PM Erdogan had correctly called for early elections that diffused political tensions at a critical point. He said that from his perspective, those opposing the direct election of the president in Turkey were not "aware" of the shared societal values of the Turkish people.

¶4. (C) Erdogan, however, seemed to have a penchant for increasing pressure, not releasing it. Kulunk praised former PM and President Ozal who, he said, "raised Turkey's stature" without becoming involved in "questionable" issues, meaning ones that would draw and focus the ire of the powerful state secularists and military - whom he claimed were much stronger in Ozal's day. Kulunk claimed Ozal was more statesman than politician and saw that Turkey had to integrate with the world at a time when passports were next to impossible to secure and imports were virtually non-existent. AKP should strive, as Ozal had, to establish confidence within the

political system while developing a fuller democracy - at the expense of the military. Kulunk's concern: confidence among the players in the system has now been lost.

AND DAVUTOGLU HAS IT WRONG, TOO

15. (C) Kulunk said AKP founders had left the Refah (Welfare) Party because it grew too extreme, departing from the wishes of Turkish society. AKP should stay focused on economic growth, not get sidetracked with issues like imam hatip schools, cartoons, etc. Kulunk criticized Ahmet Davutoglu, chief architect of the Prime Minister's foreign policy, saying, "we have to pull out of the Middle East problems as soon as possible." Perhaps reflecting insights from his foreign travel, he argued Turkey had little to offer in the Middle East and needed to correct "wrong signals" given regarding its own direction. Turkey needed to stay focused on the west. Kulunk thought it best to distance itself from problems of the region as soon as possible. He said Turkey would remain an important player but needed to see its role in the "right terms." Turkey should have been more outspoken with the U.S. on Iraq, for instance.

16. (C) But Turkey's focus should be its own problems, including human rights for headscarved women and Kurds. Even the rights of "extreme atheists" needed protection. Whoever understood this would "run the country." It would take courage but AKP best understood this necessity and was best placed to push for these rights. One desirable election outcome would be representation of the Democratic Society Party (DTP) - center-left Kurdish party - in the next parliament so that discussions of import to Turkey's Kurdish citizens take place within the framework of Turkish democracy

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rather than on the sidelines.

NOW WHAT?

17. (C) Kulunk suggested the July 22 election would be very different from the one in November 2002, despite the fact that new and existing opposition party platforms offer little more than anti-AKP Party sloganeering. Anticipating retired General and former Turkish NSC Secretary General Tuncer Kilinc's May 29 speech in London, Kulunk said the opposition served up anti-U.S. rhetoric and suggested alliances with Russia, China, and other Middle Eastern countries. He predicted the future they envision wouldn't make people happy. What were they thinking when 70% of the world's wealth is created in the U.S. and EU countries? No, the Turkish public is demanding more wealth, suggesting "a millionaire in every neighborhood" might be a good election pitch for AKP this time around. And Turkey needed to achieve peaceful co-existence for all points of view in the political spectrum.

18. (C) Unfortunately, while AKP's popularity in Istanbul stood at 45% on April 28 according to Kulunk's estimation, it has been fading due to the PM's "stubborn approach." Still holding out hope for AKP to form a single-party government, Kulunk suggested that as many as four parties could cross the 10% bar in July. The most important surprise issue, he thought, would be Northern Iraq (read PKK activity in Turkey) between now and then.

19. (C) Comment. Kulunk is right to cite former President Ozal as someone to emulate. New Democrat Party leader Agar recently cited President Bayar (reftel). Bayar's reforms led to arrest and imprisonment; Ozal's led to the adoption of a more straight-forward western market economy, despite real discomfort on the part of traditional Kemalists. Twenty years later, the transformation is everywhere to be seen, from Istanbul to the village. AKP's top leadership may make - sometimes serious - mistakes, but they know that money

makes the world go round. End comment.
JONES